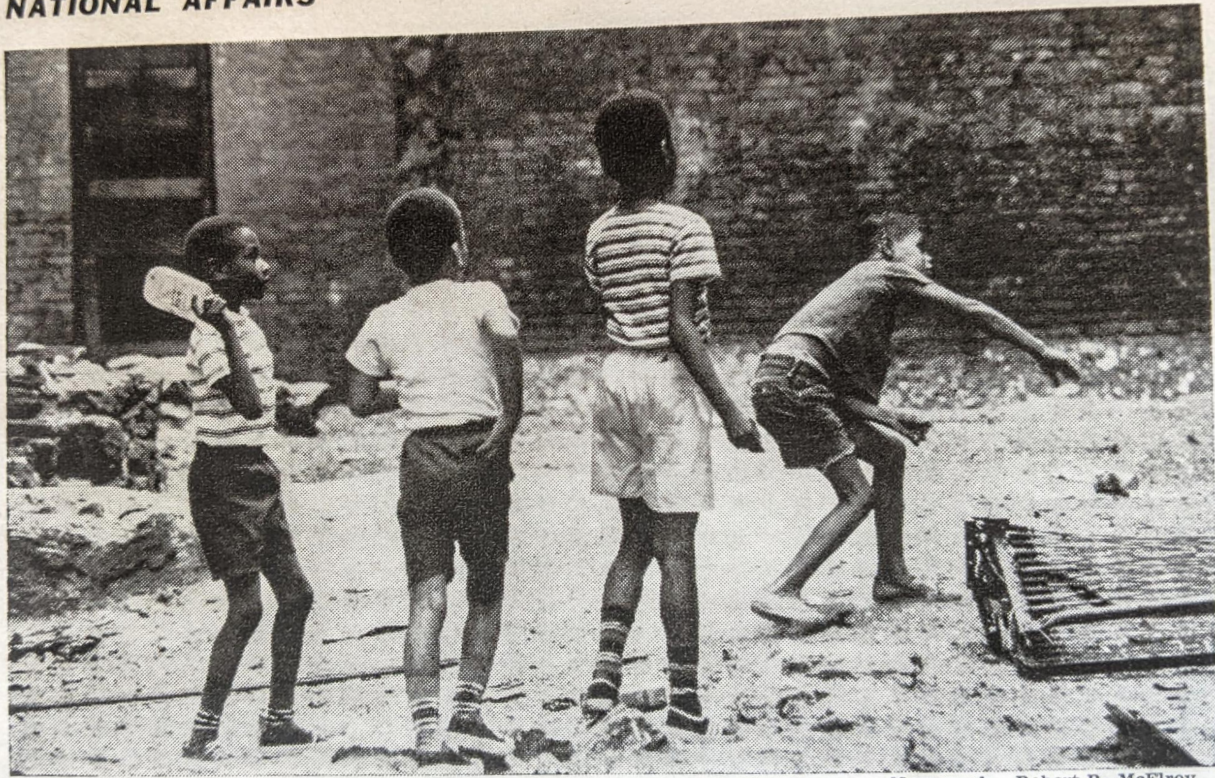


**NATIONAL AFFAIRS**



Newsweek—Robert R. McElroy

**Harlem street scene: A time bomb ticks in the ghetto**



# New Crisis: The Negro Family

**T**he United States is approaching a new crisis in race relations."

Those foreboding words begin a confidential Department of Labor report that, in four months of circulation within the government, has set off a quiet revolution in the basic White House approach to the continuing American dilemma of race. It starts by noting the cruel irony that all the civil-rights legislation written in the past decade has raised hopes it cannot possibly fulfill: "The harsh fact is that as a group, at the present time, in terms of ability to win out in the competitions of American life, [Negroes] . . . are not equal to most of those groups with which they will be competing." And, in 78 fastidiously documented pages, it traces that disability to its social roots: the splintering Negro family.

It is a weakness born in slavery, shaped by a century of poverty and prejudice, and brought to ugly maturity in the vacant days and violent nights of the black slums of postwar America. "Three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment have taken their toll on the Negro people," the report says. "The evidence—not final, but powerfully persuasive—is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling. A middle-class group has managed to save itself, but for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated."

This is the time bomb ticking at the very heart of America's "most dangerous social problem": the explosive cycle of poverty and frustration in the growing black cores of the nation's great cities. And if that cycle is not broken, the

report warns, "there will be no social peace in the U.S. for generations."

Collating the hitherto scattered fragments of census data, government reports and scholarly works, the study catalogues all the baleful symptoms: ■ Nearly a fourth—22.9 per cent—of the city-dwelling Negro women who have ever been married are now divorced, separated or deserted. The white rate: 7.9 per cent.

■ As a direct result, roughly one Negro family in four is fatherless—more than double the white total—and the problem has been getting worse instead of better. Today, in fact, more than half of all Negro children have lived at least part of their lives in broken homes by the time they reach age 18.

■ Nearly a fourth of all Negro babies born today are illegitimate. From 1940 to 1963, the white illegitimacy rate climbed from 2 to 3.07 per cent of all live births—while the Negro rate soared from 16.8 to 23.6 per cent. The rates run higher still in the big cities—and they peak at stunning levels in such hard-core ghettos as New York's teeming central Harlem, where fully 43.4 per cent of the births in 1963 were illegitimate.

■ Marriage breakups and illegitimate births have fed a "startling increase in welfare dependency" among Negroes. Started in 1935 mainly as a relief program for widows and orphans, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) now goes largely to families abandoned by their fathers. More than half of all Negro children subsist on ADC checks at some time during their childhood—compared to 8 per cent of the white children.

■ The disintegration of families is both



a cause and a result of some of the gravest problems of the ghetto poor: the staggering unemployment rates, the stunted IQ's, the poor performance in school, the swollen crime and narcotics statistics. It is the germ of a "tangle of pathology," and the sickness is contagious—a constant threat to the youngsters of millions of stable, middle-class Negro families who cannot escape the ghetto because of housing segregation. And there are danger signals that the disintegration has now begun to feed on itself.

■ A population explosion in the ghettos has aggravated all the problems—and threatens to make them worse still. Battering on illegitimacy, the birth rate for Negroes is 40 per cent higher than for whites. This means that Negroes—a steady one-tenth of the U.S. population up to the 1950s—will make up one-eighth by 1972, according to the report. Other estimates suggest that, as whites flee to the suburbs, Negroes will be in the majority in seven of the ten biggest U.S. cities (Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore, St. Louis and Cleveland) by 1990. And the baby boom is biggest in the lowest socioeconomic strata; middle-class Negro couples actually have fewer children than middle-class whites.

The Negro family problem was scarcely news to social scientists. But its very intimacy has excluded it from the public dialogue on civil rights; it reaches too deep into white prejudices and Negro sensitivities. And it lies beyond the corrective power of most of the civil-rights law and much of the economic legislation passed thus far. "We've traditionally acted," said one government man, "as if Negroes were white—and they're not. What we've done so far is create equal rights and equal opportunities and then just assumed that the Negroes could kick off this whole incredible history of oppression and take advantage of them. The trouble is that government tends to run past problems to solutions."

**Power to Bless:** So the authors of the report (among whom insiders listed Daniel P. Moynihan, now a candidate for president of the New York City Council) took their prime task to be not posing pat remedies but steering toward a consensus on what the problems are. And Lyndon Johnson has lately begun the long, difficult task of mobilizing that consensus for action. "The President," said one government official, "has the power to bless; if he talks about a subject, he can make it respectable for discussion." And so LBJ has blessed, starting with the eloquent June speech at Howard University in which he announced plans for a White House conference on race. Drawing heavily on the report, he pronounced civil-rights legis-

**Newsweek, August 9, 1965**



## NATIONAL AFFAIRS

lation only "the end of the beginning." And he set agenda Topic A for the fall conference and for the preparatory White House staff work now in progress: "Perhaps most important—its influence radiating to every part of life—is the breakdown of the Negro family structure."

For that breakdown, the President said, "white America must accept responsibility." And indeed, virtually every stage in the Negro's tragic odyssey in white America has worked against family solidarity—and particularly against the very manhood of the Negro father.

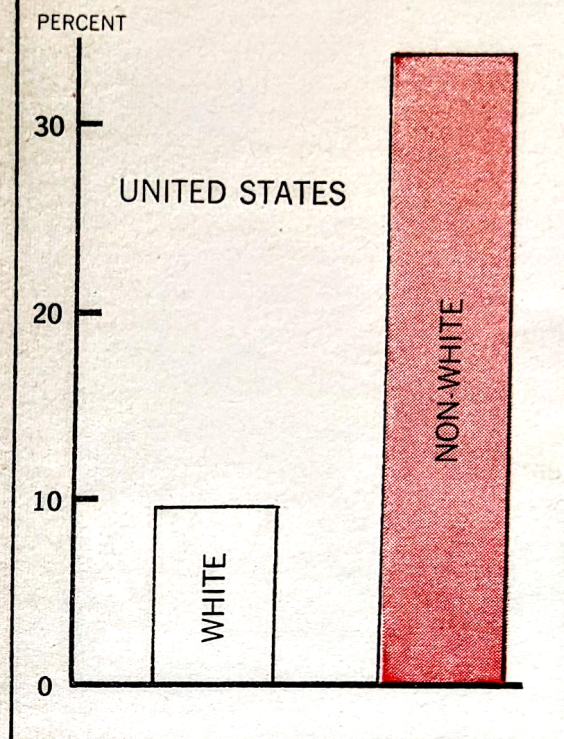
**Diaspora:** Slavemasters began the process by denying Negroes the sacrament of marriage, by breaking up families on the auction block. After the Civil War, the South—where three-fourths of the Negroes still lived as recently as 1940—erected the bulwark of Jim Crow laws to keep the Negro—and especially the Negro man—in "his place." Thus scarred by history, the Negro family was already fragile by the eve of the great black Diaspora to the cities of the North and West in the 1940s and 1950s. And for unlettered, unskilled Southern Negroes, the city proved to be—in the bleak phrase of the late Negro scholar E. Franklin Frazier in a ground-breaking 1939 study of the family problem—the "City of Destruction."

The Negro came to the city for factory work—and found, instead, "catastrophic" unemployment rates that have persisted, so the report notes, into the booming 1960s. In 1963, for example, the non-white unemployment rate was 10.9 per

cent was double the 5.1 figure for whites—and the over-all statistics tend to paper over the fact that nearly one-third of all Negro men were out of work at some time during the year, half of them for fifteen weeks or more. Negro women, as a result, are forced to take jobs, thus undermining the man's role as breadwinner—and often supplanting him as the functioning head of the family. The father stays on as an ineffectual dependent—or he drifts off, perhaps to the few remaining places where a ravaged man can assert his manhood: in the bedroom or on the street. Either way, the model he presents to his sons is one of futility, alienation and despair.

**IQ Levels:** Family discipline breaks down—and so does performance. Studies cited in the report strongly suggest that children from broken homes have lower IQ's, fall behind in school more often, drop out more readily and commit more crimes than those who grow up with both parents. The problems are worst in the deepest ghetto; in central Harlem, where half the children under 18 live in broken homes, the median IQ actually slips from 90.6 in the third grade to 86.3 in the sixth and picks up only slightly thereafter. And in the commonly matri-

## CHILDREN WHO LIVE IN BROKEN HOMES



archal slum family, where mothers tend to favor daughters, the boys are hardest hit of all. At 16 and 17, nearly 40 per cent of the nonwhite boys still enrolled in school have fallen a year or more behind, to 27.2 per cent of the girls. Only recently, indeed, has the number of Negro men in college overtaken the number of women. The matriarchy thus sustains itself; the better-educated young woman claims a disproportionate share of the prestige white-collar and professional jobs.

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**Invisible Man:** So the Negro youth comes to manhood with a crushing extra burden added to the liability of color prejudice. Not only color but his own disabilities and doubts lock him in the ghetto, where the unemployment rate among teen-agers is an appalling 29 per cent, where the violent-crime rates that so frighten whites are principally the aggressions of one imprisoned Negro against another, where alienation runs so deep that untallied thousands of Negro men simply disappear and go uncounted when the census taker comes around. In spite of everything, a rising middle class—perhaps as much as half the Negro community—miraculously manages to escape the tangle. "However," the report says, "the remaining half is in desperate and deteriorating circumstances"—and the gulf that divides it from prospering mainstream America, white and black, is widening.

What can be done to attack the problem? Whites commonly, and Negroes occasionally, argue for "self-help" measures of the sort that have worked for other American minorities. Thus, last January, the NAACP's Roy Wilkins proposed a network of "citizenship clinics" to deal with such problems as family

August 9, 1965



instability by "frank and helpful evaluation and unapologetic action." Thus, too, in a speech prepared for this week's National Urban League conference in Miami, executive director Whitney M. Young Jr. calls for a "revolution of excellence" combining internal and external efforts aimed principally at bolstering the role of Negro men.

**White Man's Door:** Yet the very size of the problem today—and the staggering burden of Negro history—impose limits on what Negroes alone can do. "President Johnson has given frank recognition to a big problem, a delicate problem," Wilkins told NEWSWEEK's Eleanor Clift last week. "He has acknowledged the prime responsibility for the problem. He has put it at the white man's door, and he's right." By doing so, Wilkins believes, Mr. Johnson is likely to stir freer discussion and further action by Negroes themselves.

The plain fact is that there are no easy—or inexpensive—answers. While the report itself proposes nothing beyond a broad policy declaration committing the government to an attack on the problem, its findings suggest that jobs remain a principal part of the solution. Thus, illegitimacy totals closely follow unemployment levels, and any sharp rise in joblessness is usually followed a year later by a similarly sharp increase in family breakups. Yet there are some frightening signs that the deceptively simple cause-and-effect relationship between jobs and family stability is dissolving. Until 1962, the number of new ADC cases each year closely followed the ups and downs of the job market. Since then, however, the unemployment rate has been going steadily down—and the ADC caseload has been going

## THE RISING RATE OF NON-WHITE ILLEGITIMACY

ILLEGITIMATE BIRTHS PER THOUSAND

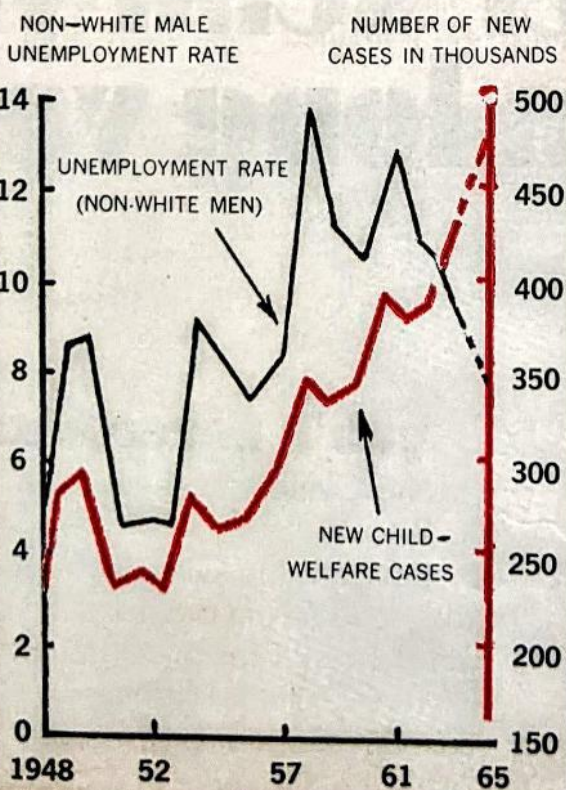


sharply up. The conclusion: the disintegration of Negro families may have fallen into a self-sustaining vicious circle.

If so, conventional economic remedies are unlikely to be enough. Poles apart from the radical left of the civil-rights movement, Young—the voice of the temperate Urban League—calls for such sweeping measures as a government-guaranteed income of no less than \$3,000, a National Work Corps to undertake an "immense" public-works program, a Federal fair-housing law and a massive "domestic Marshall plan" running the full range of Negro school, employment, housing, health and welfare problems. And, whatever comes of his proposals, the government's own ultimate answers are likely to reach well beyond the conventional rights-and-opportunities approach of the past.

The only certain course now is further study; White House staffers are already surveying social scientists and Negro leaders for fresh ideas, and the hope is that the President's fall conference will produce still more. "We're trying to cross uncharted ground," one LBJ aide said—and not the least of the uncertainties ahead is whether there will be a national consensus for action beyond existing rights laws. Programs to stabilize Negro families "would be a new departure for Federal policy," the report acknowledges. "And a difficult one. But it almost certainly offers the only possibility of resolving in our time what is, after all, the nation's oldest, and most intransigent, and now its most dangerous social problem. What Gunnar Myrdal said in 'An American Dilemma' remains true today: 'America is free to choose whether the Negro shall remain her liability or become her opportunity'."

## THE RUNAWAY CURVE IN CHILD-WELFARE CASES



Newsweek charts by Van Dyke